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ABSTRACT

The "management of crisis," as opposed to crisis management," requires prior planning. Boards of education that habitually practice courtesy and have some knowledge of group dynamics do not create controversy by their own actions and will have fewer controversial meetings to manage. Policymakers should know ahead of time what issues are likely to be controversial. Plans to minimize controversy include seeking information and opinion from the community, enlisting the aid of the media, and having previously established rules for the conduct of board meetings. (MLF)

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Eve Marchiony

MANAGING CONTROVERSIAL MEETINGS

The designated topic for the clinic, Managing Controversial Meetings and Subjects, could just as easily have been listed as the Management of Crisis. We must, however, be very clear about the fact that the management of crisis is the antithesis of crisis management, a term that rings more familiarly in our ears.

Crisis managment, which isn't really management at all, implies wafting from uproar to unanticipated uproar -- reacting in a haphazard fashion to whatever urgent matter appears -- behaving, in short, like a September leaf blowing pitifully in the willful wind.

As opposed to crisis management, the management of controversial meetings and subjects means acting rather than reacting; anticipating rather than being caught in the storm; planning ahead (and having the d still on the page); being the wind rather than the leaf.

And this managing begins long before the particular issue -- school closings, budget difficulties, school assignments, sex education, creationism, book banning attempts, religion in the schools -- ever surfaces.

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Managing board meetings in general, so that business gets done expeditiously, begins with the traditions of the particular board involved, and the particular tradition I'm talking about is one I'll call decency.

Is it the tradition of the board to behave decently? To treat each member courteously, hear him or her out, consider all opinions seriously, and try to develop board decisions which, in some way, include each opinion whenever possible?

Is it the tradition of the board to treat the superintendent and staff courteously, not to criticize destructively in public, but to phrase questions, criticism and requests for additional information in a way that seems helpful and reasonable, rather than clever and cutting?

Is it the tradition of the board to treat the public courteously, to provide time for public input, to seek out opinion, to make the public welcome and to incorporate public opinion in decision-making; even to suffer fools gladly -- or at least be polite to them?

Or, does this board fight among itself, play "gotcha" when someone makes an error, create spectacles at public meetings by interrupting, yelling, being offensive to each other and the public, and occasionally resorting to fisticuffs?

The latter board will have a lot of controversial meetings to manage; business will get done only by counting votes, and the minority -- board members and public -- will invariably go away mad, determined to create better havoc next time, and win!

Some boards do behave like that, I'm told!

I can't emphasize enough how important -- and ingrained -- this tradition of board behavior -- this "how we do things" -- is. If you doubt me, try a test. Spend some time here in San Francisco asking people from other boards how they handle any small matter. Take, for instance, the matter of voting. Ask who votes first; who last. How is the order determined? You'll find that there are a number of ways of handling voting, and that each person you speak to will feel certain that his board's way is a good one -- the way it should be done. Suggest that the voting order be changed. You'd have to have an extraordinarily strong argument for your position to get a response other than a detailed explanation as to why that board's present method is the best one.

Tradition is a powerful thing, and it molds new board members as they come along. They will behave -- more or less -- as the others do.

Since Boards of Education are policy-making bodies, and since policy-making is, in every instance, a group activity, a board tradition of respect for each other promotes efficiency and effectiveness. With such a tradition, boards will create fewer controversial meetings for themselves.

I said that policy-making is a group activity. While that may seem to some as a very obvious statement, I think it is an issue that has not received the attention it deserves. The reasons for selecting members of Boards of Education have very rarely included the individual's ability to work well in a group. We think this is an important attribute for our students, and most of them are graded, at least in the early years, on that ability, but when

it comes to selecting policy-makers, for whom it is essential, it hasn't gotten much attention.

At election time, you tend to hear the following:

"Werner Windy is a lawyer, and his legal knowledge will make him an excellent board member."

"Della Determined believes in strong classroom discipline. She's just what we need on the board to shape up the schools."

And then there's, "Albert Anxious is an accountant. He knows about budgets."

Or, "Sam Silent has a Ph.D.; Lou Loud always tells it like it is; Elbert Elbows is a real leader --" and so forth.

Once on the board, these seven highly individualistic thinkers may just have a hard time of it. Werner Windy is long-winded beyond belief, and his expertise is in divorce, not school law. Della Determined is off on a campaign to infringe on legally mandated student rights in the name of discipline. Albert Anxious compulsively totals up the figures without inquiring about the goals the budget means to achieve. Sam Silent never says a word. Lou Loud, telling it like it is, has never heard of tact. And Elbert elbows everyone out of the way in his quest for leadership.

And one of the reasons that these highly individualistic thinkers are having such a hard time is that they can't do a single thing -- good, bad or indifferent -- unless they manage to convince at least three of the other highly individualistic thinkers that it's a good thing to do.

The ability to work with others -- to cajole, urge, persuade, and seek consensus -- is absolutely essential for a competent policy-maker, and is very hard to teach. Board tradition may be one of

the most helpful ways of doing so.

An established tradition of decency -- I call it decency, because, after all, there's no requirement that board members love, or even like, each other or the public -- cuts down on controversy enormously.

Once you have established a tradition of decency on your board, where courtesy rules and outbursts are considered embarrassing aberrations; once board members have been taught about group dynamics, at least by example, the next rule on managing controversial meetings and subjects comes into play. Again, it must precede the actual controversy by quite some time. This rule says: don't tolerate surprises! Here I don't mean only that your superintendent should keep you adequately informed, though that's important. I also mean that you must know your community. Know what folks out there are thinking and doing, what's bothering them, and what they're going to hand you by way of a problem at the next meeting.

In most cases, you know what's controversial. I listed a number of controversies earlier, and I didn't notice that anyone looked very startled. So if you know what's controversial, and if you're about to do something lots of folks will hate, take some time to prepare the community for what's coming.

There's a story about a father who called his son, away at school, and told him agitatedly that the family cat had fallen off the roof and been killed. There was a shocked silence for a minute and then the son said, "Dad, that's terrible. I really loved that cat. Dad, couldn't you have broken the news more gently?"

His father said, "Well, son, I'm sorry. But the fact is the cat's dead. There's no other way to tell you."

And the son answered, "You could have called and told me the cat was stuck on the roof. And then you could have called me next week and told me the cat was still on the roof and getting weaker. And then you could have called me the week after that and told me the cat had died. At least that way I would have been prepared." The father apologized for his ineptness and hung up. About three weeks later the son got another phone call from his father. This time the father said, "Son, I'm real sorry to have to tell you this, but your mother's stuck up on the roof."

A lot of preparation needs to be done when there is an incipient crisis. Don't just say the cat's dead.

When there are community rumbles about something, alert your superintendent and have the facts checked out. Where the discontent is genuine, ask for some possible solutions to the problem, and do this before the public accosts you in outrage.

Where you are planning the controversy, as for instance in the case of a school closing, do -- and have done -- a lot of homework. Look for advice. Talk to parents, teachers, citizens. Involve the people who are going to have to live with the decision and use their help. When you're planning a controversial move, know what you're doing -- the ins and outs, various options, and possible consequences. Board members sitting on a grand dais, pontificating over a microphone to the great unwashed below, are not generally objects of great affection, particularly when they don't know what they're talking about.

It helps to have a kid or two in the public school system you're involved in, but if that's not possible, at least get to know some of the people clamoring below, so they feel you're

attuned to their problems. You can join the P.T.A., you know, even if you don't have a child in the school, and there are certainly many ways of getting to know teachers and staff members. And don't forget to talk to your neighbors.

How the matter is presented, what objections have been seriously considered, and whose opinions have been sought out will have a lot to do with how heated the controversy becomes.

And then there's the local media. Newspaper and television reporters should be allies, not the enemy. Given the fact that controversy sells newspapers and ups viewing ratings, reporters can be expected to highlight the issue. But, at the very least, they should understand what the particular issue is all about. They should be carefully briefed, treated as welcome visitors always, and viewed as intelligent allies -- especially between controversies. Taking an interest in <u>their</u> legitimate concerns -- deadlines, for example -- deluging them with information, and killing them with kindness <u>does</u> pay off, except in the really hard core cases.

The last method of managing controversial meetings, which must be established well in advance of the controversy, has to do with some board procedures or policies regarding such meetings. The board can agree on rules at a non-controversial meeting, and have them in place. These rules can include such matters as allowing all speakers to speak once before anyone has the right to speak a second time; limiting each speaker to three minutes (authorizing the president to speak for the board); refusing to allow the board members to be polled on a question; asking that questions be submitted in writing so that they can be properly responded to in writing; refusing to discuss an individual by name at a public

meeting; and any other procedure which would tend to keep the meeting orderly, polite, and productive. And the board should spend some time discussing the fact that the orderliness of a meeting cannot be the sole responsibility of the president, but must be fostered by every other member as well.

So we come now to the actual meeting at which controversy reigns. You've done all you could to contain it, but still there are idiots out there who don't know how hard you've worked, have never attended a board meeting before, and persist in painting your as the ignorant, uncaring, dastardly villain.

Well -- swallow hard several times, assume good will on the part of the speaker, and smile! Worse -- listen, be polite, try to ignore your ego that's goading you and don't try to justify you every action. Don't try to prove you're right -- even if you are.

Smile! Be patient, listen, say thank you, and try not to take it personally.

More than that, listen <u>seriously</u> and make notes of what critics say, since all of them aren't really that dumb. Some may even have a kernel of sense in their comments.

Promise to consider their objections -- and do so. Delay action wherever possible to provide time for such consideration, and for modifying decisions where objections are valid. On the other hand, don't put off decisions that must be made tonight just because the crowd is large. And don't promise anything you neither intend to do nor want to do.

Wherever you can, include -- don't exclude -- the public.

Hold on to your temper. Someone else's crassness or bad

manners don't excuse your own. Insist on decorum and inform a speaker that he is out of order where necessary. Call on your previously established rules, be courteous, fair, and patient.

Don't be intimidated, but remember that a standing-room-only crowd, even in a fairly large room, is only a tiny portion of the citizens you represent -- and probably doesn't include a single child.

Some of your sincerity, open-mindedness, concern, and hard work will get through to some of the public, but don't expect miracles. Everybody isn't reasonable; everybody doesn't think or react like you -- or even in a comprehensible manner.

If all else fails, continue to be pleasant and remember that this, too, shall pass.

When a particularly harrowing meeting is finally over -- and when you can bear to do so -- review what happened and try to identify what was good and what was bad; what worked, what didn't; what went well, what went wrong. Such a review will be helpful for next time, and, unfortunately, there probably will be a next time.

Rest assured, we all improve with practice, just as we all learn best from our own errors.